



Shadow of the Spectacle

Urban China in
Ni Weihua's
Conceptual Photography

Shadow of the Spectacle: Urban China in Ni Weihua's Conceptual Photography

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Acknowledgments

We are pleased to present the exhibition "Shadow of the Spectacle: Urban China in Ni Weihua's Conceptual Photography," featuring the photographic and video work of contemporary Chinese artist Ni Weihua. This exhibition is an art historical research-oriented and student-engaged project, organized by the Exhibition Design classes of fall 2015 with the guidance of their instructor, associate professor of Art History, Dr. Meiqin Wang.

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We also want to express our thanks to the artist Ni Weihua for his socially conscious and thought-provoking art.

Dr. Meiqin Wang

On behalf of all students from Exhibition Design classes Art 342 and 542 (Art Department, Fall 2015)

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Curator's Statement

Shadow of the Spectacular: Photographing Social Control and Inequality in Urban China

The Chinese government always recognizes the importance of disseminating political ideologies through visual means in public spaces. During the Communist era, the portrait of and words from Mao, together with other communist symbols, were painted or hung on the walls of almost every kind of buildings throughout the nation to inform and reinforce the state-sanctioned political thoughts—a legacy still visible in some minor cities and the remote countryside. With China's reform and opening up, the straightforward and steadfast communist imageries have largely disappeared in major cities and have been replaced by words and images that the government deemed more suitable for conveying its current political agendas and mobilizing the public. Without a doubt, China's rapid economic development and its reckless urbanization in the past two decades have changed much of the country's outlook and the lifestyle of Chinese urban residents. Nonetheless, the ever bigger and spectacular political billboards established in cities across the country demonstrate the government's continuous efforts in using visual representations as a means to regulate a society under dramatic transformations and to pass on new political directives. If anything has changed, it is that the government used to have a monopoly on the urban public spaces, but now it has to compete for urbanites' attention with the ever-inventive billboards from various commercial brands in the age of consumerism.

To do so, the government has adopted the advertising strategies of the commercial world. While continuing its tradition of disseminating political edicts through the hierarchical power structures that organize policy study groups to reach every neighborhood and every official institutions, the government has increasingly relied on the less authoritative, more diffusive, and creative visual representations to advertise its new political agendas. One may argue that under the condition of consumerist urbanization in the country since the 1990s, advertisements have assumed a commanding role and are utilized by both official and private sectors to promote all kinds of urban consumption ranging from concrete commodities such as high-end homes, beautiful neighborhoods, and luxurious goods to intangible symbols such as lifestyle, ideology, and cosmopolitan identity. Among all visual methods that have been employed to mobilize the public or evoke their desire to consume, outdoor billboards are a distinctive urban structure and an advertising form that reflects much of the political and economic transformations of the Chinese society. As a matter of fact, urban public spaces in Chinese cities are currently defined and occupied by government agencies along with both domestic and international corporations, all of which compete for their presence with ever spectacular outdoor billboards. Originating in the United States for advertisement on highways, this advertising medium has now infiltrated much of the urban public space in China.

The omnipresence of outdoor billboards has shaped the urban characteristics of Chinese cities. Appearing everywhere, such as on rooftops, building fronts, streets, or subway paths, these flat and huge displays not only dwarf passersby but also create new grounds of imaginative spaces, complicating the visual experience of urban living. They are also the site where Shanghai artist Ni Weihua (born 1962) develops his conceptual-oriented documentary photography and engages with the urban public spaces from both critical and artistic perspectives. Through photographs and video works, this exhibition presents Ni Weihua's two major series *Keywords* and *Landscape Wall*. It aims to explore how the advertisements of official urbanist ideologies in Chinese cities are renegotiated or challenged in Ni's work through a close reading of selective pieces from his documentary photography of street billboards in Shanghai and other Chinese cities.

Ni's *Keywords*, an ongoing photographic series that he began in 1998, addresses the promulgation of successive state policy concepts and slogans including "Development is the most important principle," "Building a harmonious society," and "Chinese dream" in urban public spaces and documents the increasingly spectacular visual presentations adopted by state agencies. *Landscape Wall*, another multiple-year series that he started in 2008, captures the penetration of the spectacle of consumerism in Chinese cities through street billboards of real-estate industry and contemplates the rising social inequality along with the country's spectacular GDP-growth. Together, they represent Ni's artistic effort to simultaneously document and deconstruct China's official discourses of economic development and consumerist urbanization.

Dr. Meiqin Wang
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Introduction

Ni Weihua and the Billboards in His Documentary Photography

In 1998, Ni Weihua began documenting official ideologies publically advertised by the Chinese government and its propaganda agencies, which resulted in his multiple-year photographic project *Keywords*. Creating the backdrop for urban citizens, the large banners and billboards repeat phrases such as “Chinese dream,” “harmonious society,” and “development is the most important principle.” These political advertisements reshape the conscious and subconscious of the urban passersby while eliciting common national goals.

Building on the ideas in *Keywords*, Ni began his *Landscape Wall* series in 2008, in which he focuses on big street billboards that function as walls and readymade backgrounds against which urban routine unfolds. For him, these billboards are the landscape of the city, thus the title of his work *Landscape Wall*. This photographic series examines the broadening effects of consumerism in Chinese cities. It also brings to light the widening inequality in the country and reveals the marginalization of the very people who help to build the city.

Overall, Ni’s work introduces and deconstructs the ever-present government directed propagandas and commercial advertisements that coat the urban public spaces. Within these spaces, urbanization and modernization collide as the impetus for consumerism.

Ariel Mazariegos and Meiqin Wang

Starting in 1998, Ni began focusing on slogans that proclaimed: “development is the most important principle.” The phrase originated from Deng Xiaoping, the late communist leader who was the mastermind of China’s economic reform and open-door policy. Often, the phrase was put on empty advertisement boards that had yet to be sold. There has been a long history in China of promulgating political messages in public spaces, notably hand-painted posters from the Maoist era. Today, however, the style has greatly changed and computer generated images are widely used. The slogans, advertised the same way as commercial brands, are ubiquitous in Chinese cities and Ni referred to them as “advertising words.” Ni explains, “with development as the main theme, all conflicting economic, political, social, and cultural problems already seem to be solved because all social groups and every individual are ‘developing’.” Of course, Ni is being satirical here. China’s headlong plunge into economic development has caused acute social problems but these are overshadowed by the mandate of development and even considered a necessary sacrifice for China’s transformation into a modernized urban nation. With this work, Ni expresses his interest in examining the repercussions the slogans have on China and its people. He believes that it is through repetition that these advertising words are most effective. As urban citizens carry out their daily routine, they absentmindedly reshape their consciousness and subconsciousness by merely being exposed to the omnipresent slogans.

Ariel Mazariegos and Meiqin Wang



Keywords – Development, selective pieces, photography, 1998-2006



The resurgence of the word “harmony,” or slogans like “build a harmonious society” and “harmonious demolition” emerged around 2006 under the administration of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabo. This campaign attempted to alleviate severe social and environmental issues arising from over two decades of pro-economic development. Despite the rapid taking over of urban public spaces with the “harmony” slogans, many social problems continued to exist. Ni believed that the two major contributors in Chinese public spaces are political ideology and consumerism; the collusion of the two establishes the most powerful form of control over Chinese citizens in contemporary times. With his continuous documenting of how the billboards advocating “harmony” interact with urban spaces, Ni is able to draw attention to this form of social control in a unique way that may be influenced by his own daily routine. Besides making art in his spare time, Ni has been a full-time employee of Shanghai Baosteel Engineering and Technology Group Co. Ltd. since 1985. Having a job outside of the art field has, to his knowledge, given him the insight to freshly engage with the real world. Along with providing him the intrepidity to formulate intentionally unsophisticated and unedited compositions, it encourages him to present an unbiased documentation of China’s political climate.

Ariel Mazariegos and Meiqin Wang

In 2013, President Xi Jinping marketed “Chinese dream” as a new political slogan in his administration’s effort to pursue national rejuvenation and prosperity. He emphasized that every individual Chinese citizen’s dream could only be achieved through the complete realization of a common national dream, which he termed Chinese dream. The “Chinese dream” phrase has soon replaced the earlier “harmony” slogan to become the content of a new nationwide political billboard campaign. Ni follows the supersession of political slogans closely, for which he termed “language event,” which occurs when a new leadership takes over in China. Billboards with phrases such as “China fulfills its dream and all families prosper”, “Beautiful Chinese Dream,” and most noticeably, “Chinese Dream, My Dream” have proliferated across China. This catchword, dream, accompanied by various symbols of both cultural and political significance, such as the Great Wall, the national flag, and the Tiananmen Gate, now populates the public spaces in Chinese cities and frames the daily activities of urban residents. It is the dream of a new state administration that wishes to control the mindset of the public and demand their unconditioned support so as to continue the single-partied authoritarian regime.

As such, Ni’s *Keywords - Chinese Dream*, along with his *Keywords - Harmony* and *Keywords - Development*, documents Chinese government’s strategy to gain national loyalty and reveals the focal point of each administration. While each administration garners support for their agenda using different phrases for their billboard campaigns, they can be seen to have been collectively developing the Chinese dream.

Ariel Mazariegos and Meiqin Wang



Keywords – Chinese Dream, selective pieces, photography, 2013-2015



Landscape Wall – Shanghai Dahua Road, 10:30-11:00, September 9, 2009, photography, 2009

ers, Ni is emphasizing the importance of these men, who represent the disenfranchised social group in contemporary China. The emphasis on these migrant workers in this image, however, does not correlate to how the urban public perceives this group. Ever since China adopted its official policy for urbanization, millions of countryside folks have migrated to the cities looking for better opportunities. They helped to reconstruct cities like Shanghai into spectacular metropolitan centers that conform to China's pro-urban development strategies. Nonetheless, they are largely excluded from the new social wealth gained from the rapidly growing economy and are not receiving proper acknowledgment for their contribution. Ni's image gives attention to these laborers who, judging from the lack of confidence in their facial expressions, probably do not take pride in the important work they are doing since they have been marginalized in Chinese cities.

Looking at *Landscape Wall - Shanghai Dalian Road*, one's eyes are immediately drawn to the four men photographed candidly in the foreground. Judging by the bright orange construction hats three of them are wearing and the multiple hardware tools one man is carrying, these men are construction workers. They appear monumental in relation to the billboard depicting an aerial view of a vast urbanized city. The city is dotted with skyscrapers and criss-crossed with streets. Along the horizon are notable structures belonging to the city of Shanghai, such as the Oriental Pearl Tower and the giant ferris wheel. By creating the illusion of gigantic construction work-

Alyssa Asprer

In *Landscape Wall-East Zhongshan Road*, four figures walk one after another. Behind them is a large billboard with people walking along a pier next to a beautiful waterfront. Far in the background is a row of high-rises, some bearing the logo of popular brands such as Epson and TDK. For people who have been to Shanghai, the scenery illustrated by the billboard is unmistakably the famous Shanghai Bund along the west bank of the Huangpu River, one of the most popular tourist sites in the city. The title of this piece given by the artist confirms its actual location. Represented in a clean and almost whitewashed style, however, the real looks surreal. Ni's process of art making includes setting up his equipment in front of a billboard and patiently shooting in front of his chosen sight. About 5000 photos have been taken that document different urban locations where passersby and the background billboards form various relationships. With such tedium, Ni is able to choose interesting compositions that are both documentations of a specific place and time and emblematic of the effects of China's consumerist urbanization. In this piece, the billboard is probably advertising urban tourism, one of the fastest-growing industries. Although unstaged, it seems purposeful that two of the figures in the forefront peer into the billboard landscape while the other two turn towards the viewer, as if being alerted by the artist taking photos. Are they tourists coming to enjoy the famous scenery of Shanghai? Their taut and tiresome expressions seem to suggest otherwise. Here a subtle difference between the space inhabited by these real-life people and the idealized space created by the billboard illustrate the actual social divisions.



Landscape Wall – East Zhongshan Road No.1, Shanghai, 11:20-11:40, July 4, 2009, photography, 2009

Ariel Mazariegos and Meiqin Wang



Landscape Wall – Hengfeng Road, Shanghai, 15:00-15:30, April 18, 2009, photography, 2009

of the two different advertisements in Ni's photo suggests the co-existence of two vastly different realities in urban China. Moreover, the pedestrian carries a large bag that is made of cheap, lightweight, and durable tarpaulin. This type of bag has been a known symbol of migrant workers in China, thus identifying this man as a member of the reality that the torn flyer is part of. He nonetheless, is burdened with the content of his bag and is not able to pay attention to either the grandiose billboard or the humble flyer. On the other hand, the flyer serves as a signifier, reminding viewers that the magnificent cityscape behind the passing man is only a façade and allowing them to become aware of the existence of a massive billboard. Often, large billboards much like this one that promises a fantasy of good life are used as a fence to cover up construction that may be going on behind it. The man walking by may be one of the many laborers who have worked behind this billboard and many others, completing one construction project after another that contributed to China's rapid modernization and urbanization. Now the job is done and he has to leave since there is no place for him in the fantastic world that he helped to build.

The photograph *Landscape Wall -Hengfeng Road, Shanghai* shows a pedestrian looking at the ground carrying a plaid bag on his shoulders. Behind him, pictured on a billboard, is a line of skyscrapers just beyond a vast body of water. Yachts sail across the water and a bird is pictured soaring through the sky. In the middle of the image, a small, torn flyer is affixed to the billboard. The former, obviously, advocates modernized urban living with high-end recreational activities and luxurious consumption; the latter, judging from the texts that remain visible, advertises daily jobs for casual labors in some low-end entertainment industries. Like well-made billboards, this kind of simple flyer is a familiar image in Chinese cities, tailored for low-class denizens, sometimes even advertising illegal jobs. The presence

Ariel Mazariegos

In Ni's *Landscape Wall-Shanghai Dahua Road*, the juxtaposition of four real-life laborers in the foreground and the gargantuan advertisement in the background parallels reality and fantasy. The advertisement, which displays two sizable multi-story houses, is representative of an idealized urban lifestyle. It is itself a symbol of many common aspirations bundled into one, namely the desire present in many Chinese citizens to obtain substantial wealth, live in a large, well-made house, obtain nice clothes, a nice car, a spouse and perhaps a child, etc. The couple

walking into one of the houses is a representation of that life and a stand-in for the viewer, meant to invite them into that fantasy. The advertisement seems to encourage consumerism and more specifically the desire not just to purchase this property, but also to buy into the whole urban ideal it represents. In this context, the path of the laborers is of particular interest, as it appears precisely perpendicular to that of the couple in the advertisement, much as their own reality is entirely separate yet intersecting. For these men, their reality might well mean working in the construction of the very buildings advertised, and yet because laborers such as themselves are often underpaid, they will likely never be able to afford such a luxury as one of these properties. Beyond that, the life of excess that a capitalistic society in general asserts as the ultimate mark of success is also almost entirely out of their reach.



Landscape Wall – Shanghai Dahua Road, 12:30-13:00, May 23, 2009, photography, 2009

Ariel Smith

As mentioned elsewhere, Ni does not stage a setting for his *Landscape Wall*. He searches for an appropriate location and waits for the perfect moment to take his photo. This makes Ni's conceptual photography interesting and intense. He treats a specific site and the advertisement there as an existing urban reality, but right upon this reality he deconstructs the consumerism-oriented mode of development that is promoted nationwide in the mainstream media. He freezes scenarios in which high-end advertisements encounter people of low income, resulting in awkwardness and disharmony. His work reveals that advertisements have actually formed a new type of urban space themselves, often serving to distinguish and stratify the population. *Landscape Wall-Shanghai Langao Road*



Landscape Wall – Shanghai Langao Road, 16:00-16:30, November 26, 2009, photography, 2009

Road is a vivid portrayal of spaces of differences. The image opens into a big billboard portraying a well-equipped and well-lit kitchen of a well-to-do urbanite. Through the large window we see mid-sections and roofs of some skyscrapers outside, indicating that the apartment is located on an upper floor of a skyscraper, a desirable location for urban dwellers. An elegant housewife whose dress matches the fresh and clean lines of the kitchen stands relaxed and about to drink from a cup she is holding. This carefully constructed space of prosperity and modernity, however, is abruptly intruded by an ordinarily dressed young girl who happens to pass by the billboard, holding a baby in her arms. This person, identified by the artist as a nanny, a job carried out mostly by rural migrants, appears disheveled and tired. Her posture and her dark outfit are an obvious contrast to the elegant and well-groomed woman in a light grey outfit, so too her numbed facial expression compared with the sweet and contented smile of the latter. They belong to two totally different worlds that are simultaneously produced by China's market-driven urban transformation.

Meiqin Wang

In Ni's *Landscape Wall-Qingyang Temple, Chengdu, Sichuan*, he captures a Chinese woman in a black outfit passing by a huge billboard that displays a brand new high fashion shopping center. The billboard shows, among other fashionable images, a huge billboard hanging over the rooftop of the glass-walled building featuring an attractive Western fashion model reclining on her side and showing off a luxury handbag. She is in strong contrast with the middle-aged and ordinary-looking Chinese woman who carries on her shoulder a cheap plastic bag, which suggests her identity as a trash picker.



Landscape Wall – Qingyang, Temple, Chengdu, Sichuan, 11:15-11:25, October 24, 2011, photography, 2011

These two women, along with these two bags, represent two vastly different worlds, both produced by China's rapid economic development and urban transformation. Their positions are symbolic of the unequal structures of the social stratum, in which the rich are staying on top and the poor are staying on the bottom. The outfit of the middle age woman and her large black bag tell a clear message: she does not belong to the ultra-urban world advertised in the billboard. She looks away from the consumer-oriented billboard and the woman illustrated on it, as if to acknowledge a sour reality that the spaces of leisure and consumption only mean exclusion for people like her.

Minyi Liang



Landscape Wall – Huyi Road, Shanghai, 10:05-10:30, July 2, 2011, photography, 2011

ty. This billboard illustrates a cosmopolitan shopping mall with foreign and trendy American cuisine in floor-to-ceiling glass panels with bright signage, all advocating consumerism and globalization. Strands of globalism are apparent with the advertising of American restaurants including Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken, among others. Moreover, the depiction of foreign people who are enjoying the shopping mall indicates how much Shanghai caters to the culture of global leisure, which is also a tendency embraced by other Chinese cities.

Ni's photo, *Landscape Wall -Huyi Road, Shanghai* captures a young man walking by an oversized billboard of a shopping mall with his eyes closed. The exhausted man appears uninterested in the computer-generated world to his right. His disregard signifies that China's busy citizens are unfazed by the ubiquitous presence of consumerist billboards. The display of many similar billboards not only subconsciously lures Chinese people into consumption, but also encourages over consumption as a way to express one's urbanity and modernity.

Mei Wah Lois Morimoto

Real estate billboards comprise a large portion of the documentary work from Ni Weihua. His *Landscape Wall* series explores the close relationship between China's rapid economic growth and the unchecked and speculative housing developments. The latter is one of the main factors that have excluded many low-income citizens from realizing their dream of owning an affordable home in the city. In the photograph, *Landscape Wall-Songhu Road, Shanghai*, a lonely man walks in front of a billboard that displays a woman relaxing in a backyard pool of a nice house. The night sky is just as clear as the pool that the woman sits in. She appears to be looking out onto the view of the city from her peaceful escape. Although appearing very differently in their



Landscape Wall – Songhu Road, Shanghai, 9:48-10:18, April 4, 2013, photography, 2013

economic status, the presence of the two figures in Ni's photo can be read in relation to urbanization. The idealized western looking woman and her setting are created by advertisers promoting consumerism and urbanization. The ordinary looking man straightforwardly experiences the effects of urbanization as he is surrounded by images such as this in the highly developed city of Shanghai, although he may be still living in a pre-urban condition. The shift in scale of the two figures, in which the man in the foreground appears to be smaller than the woman in the background, carries specific meaning. Unlike other photos in the series, the scale shift between the figures in this piece indicates that the foreground is in a different space than the background. Symbolically, the walking man has no chance of entering the idealized world.

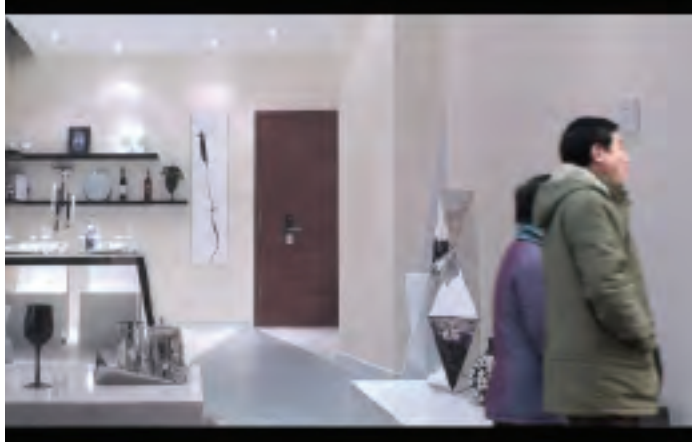
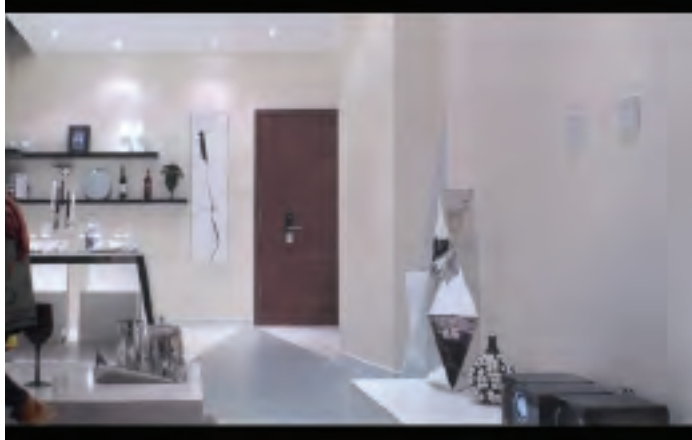
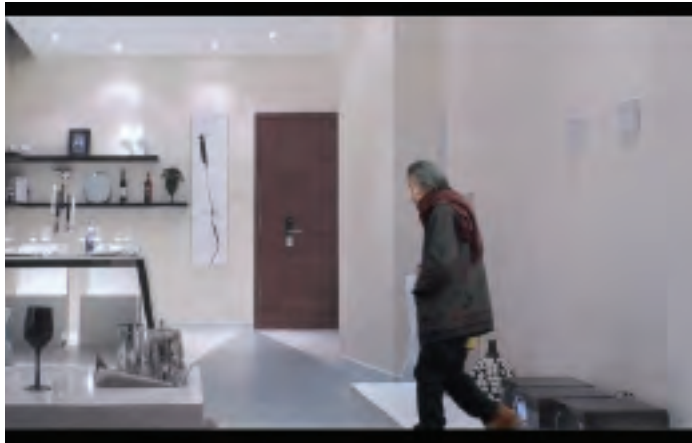
Ariel Mazariegos



Ni Weihua's recent foray into video has proved to be viewed well conjunctively with his photographs. *Keywords* series captures text-based billboards promoting political propaganda that become the wallpaper of the urban space. *Landscape Wall* series frames, indistinguishably, the lavish billboards and the passersby who form somewhat awkward relationships with them. Ni's short and multiple-sectioned video work *Landscape Wall* is developed out of his photographic series of the same title and includes two new aspects that are unrepresented in his photographs – sound and motion. The video carries the same compositions as his photographs do. Billboards advocating high fashion, modern life style, and lavish consumption dominate the whole scene and serve as the background against which people pass by. However, the use of sound adds a new dimension to the work. Slow moving traffic, the sound of horns, and faint voices take viewers directly into the urban environment and make them more aware of the amount of people that may walk by within a short time. The effect the billboards may have on its subjected viewers seems slow and subconscious. Just as in the photographic *Landscape Wall*, the artist plays with the difference between the real and the virtual worlds. At first glance, the pedestrians seem to exist seamlessly within the illustrated space and are surrounded by exquisite settings. Upon close watch, however, the viewers will find out interesting and contradictory details. For example, a woman walks past a mirrored vase on a coffee table without having her reflection appeared. This detail shuts her out of the very world supposedly designed for her. It is then that the viewers reinsert her back into the "real" world.

Ariel Mazariegos and Meiqin Wang

Landscape Wall, video, selective screen shots, 16mins (8x2mins), 2013-2014



Landscape Wall, video, selective screen shots, 16mins (8x2mins), 2013-2014

Artist Biography



Ni Weihua (born 1962, Shanghai) is a contemporary artist with experimental spirit and critical consciousness. He has drawn considerable interest from the Chinese art and cultural circles since the beginning of 1990s with his large-scale performance art series *Continuously Spreading Event -Red Boxes and Posters*. His early works of art engaged with the linguistic context of contemporary social life through the strategy of “intertextuality,” casting his witty and ironic comment on the industrialized modern society that China was developing into. During the middle of the 1990s, Ni created an installation series entitled *Fine Arts: A Legal Existence of the Term and Its Object* and afterwards collaborated with Wang Jiahao on a conceptual series entitled *Linear Cities*. Both works explored the boundary of art and experimented with new ways of art making, with which he became recognized as one of the representative contemporary artists of the 1990s in China. Since 1998, Ni has worked with photography and most recently video, documenting and deconstructing the dominance of official propaganda and commercial advertisement in urban public spaces through his *Keywords* and *Landscape Wall* series.

Selected Solo Exhibition: Neo-expressionism----'89 Ni Weihua Exhibition of Paintings (1989, Shanghai); Key Words “Development” and “Harmony” (2008, Beijing); Landscape Wall: The Chinese Reality Through Different Angle of View (2012, Shanghai)

Selected Group Exhibition: Art Works of Wang Nanming and Ni Weihua/The Symposium on Contemporary Shanghai Art (1992, Beijing); China Contemporary Art Documents Exhibition (1993, Guangzhou & 1994, Shanghai); The First Guangzhou Triennial (2002, Guangzhou) ; “Inward Gazes----Documentaries of Chinese Performance Art” (2005, Macau); Lianzhou International Photography Festival (2010,2012,2014, Lianzhou) ; 1st Beijing Photo Biennial (2013, Beijing) ; 5th Bi-City Biennial of Urbanism\Architecture (2013, Shenzhen) ; Marrakech Biennial 5 (2014, Marrakech, Morocco) ; “China Art in Brazil” (2014, Sao Paulo, Brazil) ; 56th Venice Biennale (Collateral Events)

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